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Ted Lyon and **Jorge Luis Borges** in **conversation**. This photograph was taken during Borges’s 1976 visit to Brigham Young University. Courtesy Ted Lyon.
An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges: Conversation and Commentary on Art, Strength, and Religion

Ted Lyon

"BORGES FULFILLS DREAM, VISITS UTAH." Local papers praised his presence. Largely as a result of the following interview, world-renowned Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges twice visited Utah. He came in 1972 and 1976, hosted by the University of Utah and Brigham Young University, and spoke to eager overflow audiences who applauded his candor and thrilled at his self-effacing humility. Students, faculty, and visitors felt a mystic, almost spiritual rapport with Borges. After his visit I asked him:

“How did you react to Utah, Borges?”
“I was disappointed; it wasn’t what I expected.”

I worried that we had been poor hosts, that he had taken offense at some inadvertent omission on our part.

“It’s not at all like Mark Twain portrayed. Brigham Young and his Mormon Church do not control everything; I smelled cigar smoke. And I felt so perfectly safe on the streets. The women seemed so charming, so attractive, not at all like Twain said. But that was his way to make humor, no? Salt Lake City seemed like any other modern city to me. People were so kind. I don’t know quite what I expected, but it just wasn’t the same; I suppose that things have changed since Twain visited Utah. A professor at BYU [Ed Hart] even wrote a wonderful poem to me; could you imagine such a thing in Mark Twain’s day? No, no, not at all. Yes, I was disappointed, but what a nice disappointment, no?”

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Jorge Luis Borges

Jorge Luis Borges is likely the single most influential Latin American author of the twentieth century. He was born in Argentina in 1899 and died in Switzerland in 1986. As a child, he learned English from his British grandmother and from his father's library. He began his writing career at the age of nine. He is best known for his 1940s collections of short stories—Fictions and The Aleph—as well as hundreds of poems and insightful essays from the 1920s all the way through the mid-1980s. American and British critics and writers "discovered" him in the early 1960s and helped disseminate his works and influence throughout the world. Borges's concerns extend beyond the physical and social problems of Argentina and Latin America to the more universal metaphysical relationships of humanity with deity, time, and death.

The Interview

I first met Borges on September 3, 1968, on the second floor of the old maze-like Argentine National Library in Buenos Aires. He stepped out of his spacious office and extended a somewhat flowery greeting, while Chilean poet Waldo Rojas nervously introduced us in Spanish. As soon as Borges learned that I had come from the United States, he spoke only in English—his own calm and quiet blend of British English, mixed with a very slight Argentine accent. Borges seemed to be an integral part of this impressive, high-ceilinged, Renaissance building—both classic holdovers from earlier times. He commented on the irony that what is now the National Library had once been the National Lottery—an obvious indication that "humanity is truly making progress, that is, when lotteries become libraries." We strolled into his leather-lined office and sat down. Borges paid little heed to my Chilean friend (who spoke no English) but with his lifeless eyes focused his face and words toward me.

Borges: And welcome to my Argentina.

Lyon: Thank you, Mr. Borges; allow me to introduce myself. I am Ted Lyon; I teach at the University of Oklahoma.
Interview with Jorge Luis Borges

Borges: I am delighted to meet you. But please just call me Borges; I prefer that, you know. And what is your specialty in English literature, Professor Lyon?

Lyon: Well, um, it's not English literature. I am a professor of Spanish, and I teach Latin American literature. In fact, I often teach the stories and poetry of a certain Jorge Luis Borges.

Borges: Oh, that's all too bad; everything that's good in literature has been written in English, you know.

This statement truly caught me off guard. Was Borges's comment about literature in the English language to be taken seriously? Was he merely jesting? Or, was he somehow testing me? Should I—supposedly the formal interviewer in this verbal exchange—follow up on this dogmatic assertion about writing in English? I already knew of Borges's love of things British, but should I directly challenge the validity of his categorical and blatantly incorrect statement? Or, should I simply ignore it? I quickly opted for a courteous, evasive approach, but at that moment I realized, and had frequent confirmation during the next ninety-five minutes of the interview, that he was a master of the put-on, of playing verbal games with the interviewer. He often controlled the direction of the interview more than I. I quickly stammered,

L: Well, I, uh, quite enjoy the stories that you write; they are very good.

B: Thank you, but they are of very little worth, I'm sure.

L: May I record our conversation here today?

B: Yes, yes, of course, but I won't really say anything important you know, so why would you want to record my words? Perhaps recording . . .

L: As I said, I have come from the University of Oklahoma, and we would like to invite . . .

B: Oklahoma! Oklahoma. That is such a round word, a complete word, made almost perfect by the repetition of the same vowels—O-a-o-a; such a poetic word! I was in Texas in 1961,
and I recall many people talking about Oklahoma. It's an Indian word, no? What a fine word it is. And what does it mean?

L: It's a composite word from a native language that means something like the "place of the people." Okla means "people;" I believe; homa or humma means "red." So, it's something like "Home of the Red People."

B: Yes, yes, that's lovely. Oklahoma! Then there's Potomac, Chicago, Michigan, and Wisconsin. What pleasant sounds. English is such a good language for assimilating other languages. Where it came in contact with the Indian languages it was so much better prepared than Spanish. It reproduced the native sounds much better. The Indian words [in English] are beautiful, no? Not at all like the harsh, rather ugly, sounds of words like jujuy or Chapultepec or Mapuche in Spanish. No, no. They are too abrupt, too chopped—unpleasant words, don't you think? English just sounds so complete.

L: Well, I guess so. As I was saying, we'd like to invite you to come . . .

B: And the American poets have captured all this so well. Walt Whitman loved the native words:

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born . . .
Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods . . .
Chants of the prairies,
Chants of the long-running Mississippi, and down to the Mexican sea,
Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota,
Chants going out from the centre from Kansas.

I think Whitman used Long Island as a microcosm for all the United States, no? Perhaps it was unconscious, but it was his starting place. Do you like Whitman? He's one of our great poets.

L: Yes, I do, but I can't recite his poetry from memory like you can.

B: But you must know "Pioneers! O Pioneers"; it's one of his best-known poems. He uses many Indian words in that fine poem—Nebraska, I believe.

L: Yes.
B: And Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost—they also loved their land, their country, deeply and captured it so well in verse. Have you read them?

L: Yes, I once heard Carl Sandburg read his own poetry when I was a college student. I was surprised at how big, how tall he was; his hands seemed so large, so masculine. I didn't see how he could be a poet with such big hands; my misconceptions, I suppose.

B: But that's just the point. American poetry is sturdy, hearty; these are powerful men, and they used powerful words, no? It [North American poetry] praises the land and the people who settled it. I like Robert Frost very much, but not the commonplace poetry that everyone quotes about two roads. “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it.” Frozen-ground-swell—that is strong; I would like to be able to write verses of such power.

L: Yes, I've seen Frost on television. He was a friend of John F. Kennedy and died in the same year Kennedy was killed, I believe.

B: So many of your great poets come from New England. That must be where they get the toughness. It was a center of great thinkers. It was the center of thought in America. Maybe the weather made them hearty.

L: Yes, I'm sure.

B: And what a fine word. You know, I hadn't thought of this—the word hearty. It's from the word heart, but it doesn't mean soft or full of emotion; it means tough, healthy, or strong, or something like that.

I was raised at a time when it was fashionable to praise the United States and its writers. I was raised on a steady diet of American writers, especially the nineteenth century. We loved the poetry, America. [Argentine President Domingo Faustino] Sarmiento brought eighty schoolteachers from New England, mostly old maids, I suppose, to establish normal schools in Argentina. You can still go out on the pampa to this day and find a “Betsy Brown” school, named for the fine women who came here to Argentina. We owe a debt to the
United States. But now it is very much in vogue to be angry. The Argentine young people find so many reasons to criticize. They want to attack; their teachers cause them to hate America. But they have not read Whitman and Frost.

If you teach Latin American literature, you must read [Horacio] Quiroga, no? Well, people compare him to Edgar Allan Poe, but there's no comparison. Quiroga was just an imitator, a copier. He was a good follower, but I don't think he had a bone of originality in him, not one. You have read [Poe's] "Tell-tale Heart." He showed such an insight, originality, not at all like Quiroga. And the color white was a sign of evil for Poe. Now how curious, because we usually think of white as pure, as good. But not Poe. White was evil for him, maybe for all the writers of that time. I think of Melville. His whale is white, you know—an evil thing, a destroyer, not only of the body, but also of the soul. Now why should white symbolize evil? We think of it as something good or clean or maybe positive. And I think Poe's "Narrative of Gordon Pym" is a fine novel. At the end, there appears a great white monster, a white thing coming out of the snow or the mist. It is terrible. White is evil; like the whale, it is filled with destruction.

At this point, I realized that we had strayed a long way from my intention to invite Borges to the University of Oklahoma. He seemed more interested in merely talking to someone in English, in extolling the literature of my country, in sharing his experience with North American literature. I knew that he was a teacher of various world literatures, and had just recently published Introducción a la literatura norteamericana (An Introduction to North American Literature) (1967) in collaboration with Esther Zemborain de Torres. In this introductory book, he had examined the origins of North American literature
and devoted special chapters to Poe, Cooper, Whitman, and Melville, authors whose works and words he was now quoting to me. The book also contained a section on U.S. science fiction, detective and western literature, and the oral poetry of the "Redskins." I knew Borges had a reputation as an avid reader of world literatures, but I was simply unprepared for his thorough knowledge of my country's literature, for all the poetry he had obviously memorized. He continued:

B: Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping...
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore.

L: Yes, that's Poe's "The Raven."

B: Rather overdone, don't you think? All that alliteration. But the bird is black; perhaps that should symbolize goodness. But no—that is also evil, foreboding. Yes—another fine English word—*foreboding*. I was just re-reading the poem a few days ago and it was on my mind.

L: But Borges, how do you read now? You said you were just re-reading. What is the process?

B: Well, of course, I don't really read as I used to. My eyes don't work anymore. But I am a professor of literature, you know. Every day I have students who come to study with me in the morning. They read to me; I have taught them to read and pronounce English and even Old English and now they read to me. Then I discuss the texts and teach them. It's a good relationship; we have read many things together. They seem to like it; I am a teacher, you know. The students come right here to my office. Just a few days ago we finished our study of Old English. I think I have now read all of the poetry that exists in Old English, all of it now. And the students, they are very intelligent, very well prepared. When we were reading this morning, we bumped into the word *aefentid*. And what a fine word it is. It was used in the ninth century; it's the
word for that poetic time of day, towards night, something like *eventide*, of course. Can you imagine—Spanish didn’t have anything like it until at least the thirteenth century. And then they created such an unpleasant word—*crepusculo*, no? The accent on the third syllable [from the end] is so striking, unpleasant for such a lovely time of day, no? Spanish just did not develop the poetic qualities that English already showed so early.

L: The way you pronounced that word in Old English reminded me of my old Scottish uncle in Salt Lake City, his accent . . .

B: And he must be a Mormon, I’m sure.

L: Yes, he was.

B: And you are a Mormon?

L: Yes, I am; I was born in Utah.

B: I know Utah. I know it very well. I have never been there, but I would like to visit Salt Lake City sometime. I have been fascinated with it ever since I read Mark Twain’s, *Roughing It*, no? I think Mark Twain really liked it, don’t you? He was awfully cruel to [Mormon] women, I think. But I think he really liked Utah, would have liked to stay longer. I have been to Utah through Mark Twain. Someday I would like to go there and see Twain’s Utah. Argentine writers also wrote about Mormon Utah.

*Borges became very excited. Not only did he have the full attention of a North American in his office, but a Mormon from Mark Twain’s Utah. Without announcement he rose and, needing no direction or assistance, walked briskly some fifteen feet to a revolving bookstand in the far corner of his huge office. I followed him. His hands searched with a memorized knowledge of the feel and location of each of two or three hundred books. In a few seconds, he grasped a blue-covered, soft-back book, the Book of Mormon.*

B: How interesting. Two boys, young men, came to my apartment several years ago. They gave me this book; it is in English. I did not have to pay for it, I believe.
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L: And have you read it?

B: No, no, not the whole thing. I am blind, you know. But Mark Twain talked about the book. What did he say? I don’t remember. But because of Mark Twain, I became fascinated with the Mormons. I read a good biography of Joseph Smith, No Man Knows My History, I think. Now what a strange title. And I saw why the religion is so strong because Joseph Smith was so strong. He also came from New England, I believe. He was hearty, no? And he had such hard-working companions, don’t you think? And I don’t know why he died; I don’t recall. But I cried when I read that the Mormons had to leave their homes and cross the Mississippi River—yes there’s another lovely Indian word in English—Mississippi—when they had to leave that fine town, what was it called?

L: Nauvoo.

B: Oh yes, that is also an Indian word?

L: No, no; Joseph Smith said it was a Hebrew word that meant “City Beautiful” or something like that.

B: When they left on foot and had to cross the ice of the Mississippi River, tears came to my eyes. It was like that slave girl crossing the river in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. And all of this because they believed in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. It seems so amazing, no?

L: Yes, it is amazing. And I’m surprised to hear you use that word, amazing. In your own stories you often bring in mazes, labyrinths; now you use the word to describe Mormons or Mormonism.

B: Well, I suppose anyone who has sincere religious faith is amazing, no? Filled with mazes. But what do Mormons believe that would make them do so much for Joseph Smith? Is the faith still the same as it was in the last century? Do Mormons still honor Joseph Smith?

L: Well, yes. We don’t worship him at all, but we respect him very much. One of his unique ideas is that anyone can improve or perfect himself to the point that he too can become a god. Of course, I don’t mean on this earth, or in this life, but in a life hereafter.
B: Oh, I don't think I should like that!

L: Yes, it probably sounds like heresy to most people.

B: Bernard Shaw, I believe, said "God is in the making," and we are the making. Now, does that mean that God is still in the process of making himself or that we make him up as we exist? In English, I think it may mean both. But in Mormonism there may be many gods then?

L: Yes, in a way, but we only worship or honor God and Jesus Christ.

B: You are very much like the Roman Catholics then. My mother is a true believer. She prays every night. But I am not; I was raised in a house where one grandmother was Catholic and the other Methodist. My mother is Catholic, but my father was a very strong-willed man, librepensoador; a free-thinker, if you will, an agnostic. And I, like he, have been very happy. I think all religions are a part of one single truth, no? When I die, I want to die wholly, my body, my soul. I hope that after I die I will be forgotten, completely. I certainly hope they will never name a street or something after me. I want to cease being Borges.

No, I don't have a religion, but this doesn't mean that I do not believe in a meaning to the universe—my individual destiny is not important, but perhaps someone or something needs me to fill some mysterious purpose. Then when I've filled that service, I will die. There will be other destinies or mysteries that will take my place. I want to cease being Jorge Luis Borges. I'm tired; I'm tired of being someone. I am not a religious man; I am merely a collective hallucination, no?

L: That seems rather pessimistic. My religious faith gives me hope, something to work for, or work on, for eternity.

B: Yes, but you'll get very tired through all that time, no?
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L: We do not view heaven as a place of rest. Perhaps this, too, is heresy for many, but we believe that we'll keep working, progressing, forever perhaps, until we may become gods.

B: Then you could be creators of new worlds?

L: Yes, just like some of your characters are god-like creators—the originators in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tercius," Pierre Menard, or the dreamer in "The Circular Ruins," for example.

B: Yes, of course. There may be many gods. I have been told by a very good professor that the Hebrew version of the Bible says that "In the beginning the Gods created the Heavens and the Earth." Is that true? I do not know Hebrew. Now maybe Gods refers to the Holy Trinity, I do not know. But maybe there were many gods or a god that was so complex that he had to be referred to by a plural noun. A plural subject and a singular verb, I think. The gnostics postulate a single, absolute god at creation, but from him another divine creature is formed, and so on, until there are 365 divine creations. In the Old Testament, God is very personal, he talks to people, is interested in their families, in their lives. "This world is so strange that anything is possible," my father used to say. So God is still creating worlds and people?

L: He may indeed be.

B: Then if you are to be a god, could you create your own heaven and earth? You could choose the vegetation, the animals, the plants, people; maybe you could even invent a new sex. Everything would be possible, no?

L: Yes, I suppose, but perhaps within some limits. It's a doctrine not fully worked out in the Church.

B: Very fascinating. Is this from the Book of Mormon, from Joseph Smith?

L: Well, no, not really in the Book of Mormon, but Joseph Smith taught it.

B: And did your ancestors know Joseph Smith? Did they live in that city on the Mississippi River?

L: Well, just one of my great-grandfathers, from England, lived with his family in Nauvoo; he died there. But his wife
and children had to get out of the town, cross the river, and go west.

B: Was he Scottish?

L: No, my Scottish ancestors came to the United States later, in 1853, I believe.

B: And have you been to Scotland? It's such a lovely place. I think Edinburgh is the most beautiful city in the world.

L: No, but it [Scotland] is a large part of our family tradition.

At this point, I realized that the interview had become a friendly chat, almost a casual conversation between two new friends—there was no structured direction as I had unwisely intended. Borges had put me at ease by asking questions of me, by showing interest in my background, by his free-wheeling thoughts and comments. I would have preferred to continue talking about my religious convictions, but Borges was in control, and perhaps feeling uncomfortable talking about gods, he was now linked to Scotland.

B: So you surely know the poetry of Burns, Robert Burns. He wrote:

And O! be sure to fear the Lord alway
And mind your duty, duly, morn and night;
Lest in temptation's path ye gang astray . . .
They never sought in vain that sought the Lord aright.

I guess for Burns I "gang astray." But I'm a happy man.

L: I only know the one [poem] about "My love is like a red, red rose." In school we also studied his poem "To a Mouse." I recall the line about "the best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley." There's that word gang again. I also recall some moralizing lines about "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us."

B: Yes, yes, the fine language of Scotland.

L: I think Burns has a poem to haggis. Have you ever eaten haggis?

B: Yes, and that short bite is still lasting me and will for my entire life.
Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin-race!

Why do you suppose they like this awful dish? It's not possible to eat. How can such an unlikely-tasting thing go along with the beauty of Scotland, so green, so friendly, such wonderful buildings, such delightful language?

I had no answer, but was amazed that Borges continued quoting so much poetry in English. We walked back toward the massive desk and our chairs. I could tell that Borges was not completely blind; he looked up and smiled, awkwardly, at the afternoon sun coming through the high windows. He looked toward me.

B: But come now; you must have Scandinavian blood in you, too; you are so tall and blond.

L: Yes, my mother's family is from Sweden. We hail back to the Isle of Gotland. A cold place, I suppose.

B: No, no. That's the home, the place where Beowulf lived. Amazing. Yes, that's the spot he sailed from to free the Danes:

Ptæt fram hám gefrægn
ðød mid Gæatum,
sæ wæs mon-cynn
t(Ear off in bis homeland
good man of the Geats,
be was the stongest
Higelæcs þegn,
Grendles dæða;
mægenes strengest.
Hygelac's thane,
beard about Grendel;
of all living men)

Do you remember, recall Beowulf?

L: Well, yes.

B: The poem says they were strong, valiant men, men of the sea:

Hæfde sæ gøða
cempan gecorone
(tThe mighty man
from tribes of the Geats
Gøta lœoda
þára þe hé cêonest.
bad carefully chosen
champions, battlers)

Gøta, men from Gotland, remember?

L: Yes, but . . .

I tried to tell Borges that I had studied only a modern translation of this early epic poem in a high-school English class, and
here he was, in Argentina, freely reciting lines in Old English! I did not even understand most of the words, but Borges was filled with fire, the fire of finding a compatriot of Beowulf. His spirited recitation drowned my timid excuses.

B: ofer swan-rāde  
    mērē pēoden,  
    (the warrior-king,  
    across the swan’s riding  
    sēcean wolde,  
    þa him wæs manna þearf.  
    famous ruler,  
    since be needed men.)

Do you remember that?

No, I didn’t really remember it at all. But I suddenly realized what was happening. Borges had considered my lineage from Gotland and in his mental associations had linked me mystically to Beowulf. I understood that he was not just asking if I remembered the lines of the poem; he was really querying me about Beowulf himself. Did I recall the hero, the individual? Did I know him? Certainly I must have known him since my very distant ancestors were there, may have even sailed to Denmark with him. For Borges one man could be all men. I was not only Ted Lyon sitting in an awe-inspiring library office in Buenos Aires, I was also a knowledgeable companion to my countryman, Beowulf. And I began to realize that for Borges the world of literature was every bit as real as the chair in which he was sitting, the desk, the disappearing sunlight, my blurred, nearly nonexistent face. Perhaps his blindness gave even more reality to the literary world than to his physical surroundings. At this moment, he was definitely back in early medieval Gotland and Denmark; I had to be there, too, because I was most assuredly acquainted with Beowulf.

B: The swan-road, of course, the sea, the water. The poet also describes the wave-road, and the sail-road, all wonderful metaphors for the sea. Very powerful. Kenning. And do you like word-board, a simple, beautiful metaphor for speech? Yes. I have recently begun to study old Norse, as I have studied Old English. I suppose I shall read all that I can find
of it in this country. The *Volsunga Saga* of Iceland also talks, so poetically, of the strong men, the hearty ones, heroes.

L: Some of your poetry talks of your strong, valiant ancestors. Is this a major concern for you? Are you like them?

B: Oh no, not at all. I am a coward. No, no. I admire men of power, hearty men, courageous; these are necessary virtues for life. Our literature extols this type of life. Remember—Frost, Sandburg, Lincoln; Mark Twain traveled all across the Great American Desert. But not me; no, I am a coward.

L: Borges, thank you. I’m sorry to change the subject, it’s been delightful, but it’s getting late, and I really want to extend an official invitation to you from the University. We would like you to come to Norman [Oklahoma] for two or three weeks next year, to teach a class, and to receive an honorary award from the university.

B: That would be very nice, but you know, I am a poor man, just a librarian. I cannot afford to travel to the United States.

L: We will pay your air fare of course, as well as a very worthy honorarium for your teaching. We would also like to hold a conference . . .

B: I recall the first time I went to the United States. My mother and I took a plane to Texas. And we loved the coffee they served us on the plane; we knew we were in the United States as soon as we tasted the coffee. I cannot stand the “slop” passed off as coffee in Argentina. I shall look forward to the coffee and the conference. Please excuse me, I shall have to call my wife to tell her this very good news.

*Borges scooted his office chair over to a smaller desk, picked up the black telephone, and dialed. He spoke in Spanish with Elsa, his wife of just a year; this was his first marriage, her second. He acted almost like a giddy teenager, not revealing the reason for his joy. He told her to meet him at a favorite restaurant near the library later that evening because he had a surprise for her. She apparently pushed him to tell her what it was, but he cautiously evaded giving any details.* "But you
might want to prepare for a trip,” she teased in English; she did not understand. Borges was now jovial, excited, buoyant. He called his male secretary, who had been waiting outside the door, and gave him an order. He then asked my Chilean companion, in Spanish, if he wanted tea or coffee and, in English, gave me the same option.

B: Elsa will be so surprised, so excited. She also loves the United States. We have just been married a short time, you know; my “childhood sweetheart,” you might say.

L: We, of course, will pay for her to accompany you when you come to Oklahoma.

B: Yes, she functions as my eyes, but also as my heart, you might say.

L: It’s curious to me that in the stories you write, perhaps even in the poetry, there are almost never any women. Can you tell me why?

B: Very simple, “elementary,” as Holmes might say—I have not known any women, or, many women. Of course, my mother and my grandmother. My mother accompanied me on many trips, but now Elsa fills that role. We have been married only a short time. But I did not write about women because I did not know women, but now perhaps I will.

L: A writer should only write about what he has experienced, about what he knows directly?

B: Of course, that is logical.

L: But then how do we explain science fiction, fantasy? You certainly haven’t experienced all the things that happen to your characters; you haven’t been to all the places that appear in your stories. Many consider you a writer of fantasy; you have the wonderful ability to project much beyond the limited time and space in which you live.

B: What happens to my characters has happened to me. They think my thoughts, or I think theirs. Also, I have read; through reading I know the world—One Thousand and One Nights, Utah, Billy the Kid. And I am part of that very wonderful world.
At an inopportune moment, just as I was about to pursue the topic of why Borges had read about women but had not incorporated them into his stories, the secretary brought in some dry Argentine cookies, lemon tea for me, and coffee for Borges and Rojas. It was the same type of coffee that had so recently suffered debasement. We sipped together, chatting in Spanish and English about Argentina, Chile, poetry, food. Our cordial conversation had already gone on for more than an hour, but I sensed no urgency on Borges’s part to end it, nor to get to any more pressing matters which might be awaiting him on his nearly paper-free desk.

B: I have some problems with the young writers of Argentina. Many are so shallow, so showy. You know, I am a man of the nineteenth century. I was born in 1899. I do not feel comfortable in this century.

L: But Borges, you only lived a few months in the 1800s; everything you’ve written has been part of the twentieth century.

B: Yes, but the writers [of the twentieth century] have no depth. Ezra Pound, for example. I have tried to read him, but I can’t. When he was in London, he dressed up as a cowboy and swaggered around from bar to bar. I believe he had a large bullwhip and cracked it everywhere he went. He made quite an impression. But it’s all show. I doubt he will have any lasting value. And T. S. Eliot always leaves me with the feeling that at any moment he’ll run dry, run out of things to say. Very little substance, I feel. My readings come mainly from the last century, my century.

L: Have you read H. G. Wells?

B: Yes, yes. I think I’ve read everything he wrote, or at least published.

L: Did he influence your writing?

B: Well, I suppose so, but I don’t know how. I have read Ray Bradbury as well, but I do not find him enjoyable—shallow, incomplete.
L: In the United States, you have sometimes been compared to [Vladimir] Nabokov. I believe you were both born in the same year. Do you think there’s a direct influence or relationship?

B: Oh, I shall have to confess the doctrine of infallible ignorance; I have never read him!

Sensing that my leading questions on literary influences were too direct and were not producing any great insights at all, even perhaps bothering Borges, I ceased. Borges was much happier, more congenial, more animated, when he was directing the interview. And he was most expansive when he was in medieval England, Scotland, or most especially, in Gotland. I marveled, was amazed at the amount of poetry he had stored in his head—in just a few minutes of interview, he had quoted Old, Modern, and Scottish English; Whitman, Frost, Poe, Burns, and Beowulf (in its original or very early form)! I thought I’d try a few lines from one of my favorite minor poets, Robert Service, and quoted a couple of memorized stanzas from “The Spell of the Yukon.” Borges chuckled and mentioned that he knew of Service, that the Yukon bard, like Twain, had traveled through the West, even to the same Salt Lake City we’d mentioned earlier, and then had gone to Alaska or Canada. Once again, I was shocked—was there a writer in the English language that Borges did not know?

Despite his casual banter, which put me so much at ease, I felt that Borges certainly must have other things to do; I tried to excuse myself. But it became increasingly difficult to escape the magical, magnetic web of Borges. Only when I told him that I had to catch a bus for the airport in forty minutes did he seriously settle on a few final details regarding my invitation to come to Oklahoma.

B: Yes, yes, November, or early December, next year. My secretary will write it down and schedule for me. We can escape the heat of Buenos Aires, no? And we would like to go back to Texas; it is close, no? They treated me so well there, too
well perhaps. They gave me the key to the city of Austin, you know. Thank you. I don’t know why you want to invite me to the United States. I thank you for spending this delightful afternoon with me. Thank you. I have enjoyed it. Thank you. I will see you in the “home of the people,” Oklahoma. Strong people, I’m sure.

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NOTES

The pampa is an extensive grass-covered plain in Argentina. It is characterized by a rural life-style, and its inhabitants have often been used in literature as archetypes for the Argentine spirit.